

Bosnia and Herzegovina - 1997 - Municipal Elections

I'm Linda Edgeworth and I've been asked to share some of my thoughts and experiences during my tours as director of elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the late 1990s. My first assignment in Bosnia was in 1995, one month after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed. I was asked to review the Yugoslav election law and determine what would have to be changed to accommodate Dayton. I was also asked to draft a preliminary work plan for the Provisional Election Commission due to be formed.

Neither were perfect, but they offered a least starting. When I got to BiH in 1997, I had a contract for a work project in Russia. In my pocket, I've been asked to stop by to help develop a budget for the international supervision of the upcoming elections. While OSCE was quite well established, there was only a skeleton crew for the elections department left from the 1996 election, and so on. I was asked to stay to fill the vacated director of election spot and I remained there for 1997 and 1998 elections. I dreaded having to advise the head of mission that elections would have to be postponed one more time. There was no staff, we had no mandated international supervisors for polling stations and registration centres. He had no computers or commodities, and I knew we would have to register voters from scratch. I asked for three more months and that was granted.

For the first time since the war, elections were to be conducted at all levels simultaneously, the national presidency and House of Representatives, Anderson Wide and Anton elections and municipal elections voters received a combination of five ballots to accommodate all the races for which they were eligible. But one crucial issue had yet to be tackled in the political environment, that of creating a full loan, sustainable national voter registration. For the 1996 elections in the national framework, our borders were eligible based on their inclusion in the 1991 stasis. For the 1997 municipal elections, residency within the municipality was efficient to establish eligibility without having to provide a specific address. Unfortunately, the interesting more cell boundary line that split the country in half also split the number of cities and towns, and without a specific residence address, new problems emerged in defining the entity to which voters in the same city should assign.

The terms of peace that added more complexity under them. Voters can vote based on their residents, where they were before the war, where they were currently living or based on an address where they intended to claim residency in the future. Each board could choose to vote in person at a polling station where they were currently, even if they were voting absentee for their pre war location, or they could return to their former residence to vote in person on Election Day. Throughout the country, the trauma, the

recent war was still long and massive destruction is still plainly evident. Indicted war criminals were still at large. It was estimated that half the population remaining in the country was still displaced. Half a million of refugees, most of whom had escaped to neighbouring Croatia, and the former Republic of, the others were scattered in some 80 countries worldwide, and they were all eligible to vote, finding them establishing their eligibility, getting the right combination of ballots based on a chosen jurisdiction or where they chose to vote was a major challenge. Person's still lacked out of the documentation. Civil records have been damaged, destroyed or stolen, and many communities, and not all officials on one exchange and applicant records with officials and communities in the opposite.

A special team was established to accumulate visual examples of every possible government issued ID document for the war that could be used as an identity document on passports, to driver's licence to health records to many others so that international supervisors could recognise and accept citizens. The team also conducted extensive interviews with those seeking to register based on understanding claims of residence addresses. In extreme cases they did on site visits to the addresses claimed to confirm whether they actually existed at all. And many did not.

Three types of polling stations had to be established. Regular polling stations, absentee stations were those choosing to vote for a different jurisdiction, and twin stations that accommodated both. It meant that every ballot combination had to be available. Hundreds of all these stages throughout the country were set up, and in Croatia for refugees. The Inter-entity bounding line serves that the demarcation line between the political circle that was essentially ethnically cleansed and the federation which became a shared territory, Serbs who have been displaced from the federation side, overwhelmingly chose to vote with they were currently living in the RMS, especially among Bosniaks living in the Federation, voting for their former residents in Serbia. They came as a means of repadding a foothold in territory lost.

For many voters, choosing to vote in person where they went before the war was the safest and most practical way for them to check on the status of the homes from which they had been forced to flee. There was no freedom of Union of time, all the licence places identified. Cars. Across the interior boundary line with front sometimes making. Safe orders had been established which could be monitored by escort to provide a semblance of safe passage for all the voters trying to return to vote in person at the former district. And the population remained transient. It was estimated that between 1997 and 1998 elections, as many as 350,000 people. Including numbers of returning refugees for which there were no active figures available, creating the voter listing environment was daunting, and a task that was fought with stops and starts. Mistakes in

our corrections and problems and problem solving. And occasional attempts at fraudulent, including distribution of phoney documents. There was even an instance in which a deal was negotiated between two neighbouring communities so that Pro Lab voters would all register in one and Bosniaks voters with all registered the other voter registration of the scalp altogether and restart it in many communities.

Perhaps we were over ambitious, but several innovations were introduced to address these multiple problems. To establish the platform for the registration, municipalities were divided into settlements so that we could Geo index the voters, residence locations and to link their settlements to a specific polling station. Voter registration cards listed the village jurisdiction and polling station distributed through the local election commissions or in voter registration schemes. And 80% of the owners who actually registered never return to the site to retrieve them. The transition of the population left no doubt that many voters would show up at the wrong polling station. An Attendance ballot was offered to any voter whose name could not be found on the voter's list, where they attempted to vote. Their voter ballots were sealed in a special envelope in which the voter's details could be. At the Central county centres established for each entity, officials then compared the data on the sealed envelope against the nationwide voter rolls. If the voter was found in the database, every race that was common to both the polling stations. We appeared in a pool of the station to which he was actually assigned was counted, even if other races on the ballot could not be. 60% of all tender ballots were able to be fully or partially counted. Without such a process, more than 112,000 voters would have been rejected simply because they appeared at the voting polling station. About 25% could not be found on the database at all. Meaning they had never attempted to register. Others were found to have attempted to vote more than once.

Ultimately, in spite of the challenges, the turnout for the elections was about 70% in the Rep and among the refugees in Croatia. 82% among refugees in the rest of the world. The turnout and frying is low as concern flows that their participation results in forced repatriation in spite of a lengthy review and counting process with tendered and absentee ballots going to mix, it was ratified. The results were widely accepted as legitimate and an accurate reflection of the will of the voters.

It was pressure from the international community at the time to try to normalise procedures in a way that would make it possible to turn election administration back over to national authorities sooner rather than later. You can behind a confident, reliable and sustainable core of national election officials for the long term, was never out of mind. Working with the University of Essex in England and exercise in election and democratization, of course, was developed through which carefully selected national

staff members could receive certificates in election. Transition planning documents for the initial handover to local authorities included a requirement that a certain percentage of election staff members employed by the government had to have received that sort of the transitional budget was supposed to gradually equalise salaries in keeping with local levels and within a very few years the transition to full justice had been critical to improve the cooperation among officials on both sides of the inter-boundary line to assist displaced persons in getting compensate documents.

An official association of election officials, via, was established and kicked off with a three day retreat. At first, officials from each entity distance themselves from the other's. There's a retreatment they begin to consciously mingle and by the end we're showing the signs of becoming a unified professional body. It became so proficient that once they handled work for national authorities, they entered into an agreement with the government to develop all the training materials for election officials. Their status as a strong, productive and well respected professional organization has continued to grow and the association is still going very strong these 25 years later.

Working on the BIH elections in those years was yhe most challenging in my career, and the lessons learned were never far from my thoughts as I've worked on other assignments around the world. My takeaways never ignore the practicalities and wisdom of traditional practices. And choose the best of them to underpin the world. Remain humble knowing that we could never achieve our work without the dedication, commitment and loyalty of national staff, and take inspiration from the voters who persist and persist to exercise their right to vote. In spite of all the frustration for the latest struggles of our sometimes imperfect processes.